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Undeserved annoyances merit remembrance

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—All lives finish the same way. But each life gathers different amounts of joy, love, catastrophe, sorrow and cosmic fairness along the way.

Most people these days believe they've been denied their full and rightful share of cosmic fairness. They might point to a lack of opportunities, or they feel they've gotten more bad luck than good, or they wish that they were born smarter, better looking or healthier. Everyone can cite examples of being penalized without just cause.

Cosmic fairness is one of those things that is, or isn't, or is maybe or is unknowable. I've traveled all four directions on this compass at various times (though for reasons of intellectual consistency, not at the same time).

If cosmic fairness is at work, it should be dropping an equal number of grains of good and bad onto the appropriate pan of each person's balance scale. I've not seen this happen too often. Most of us get more bad than good, which I can say with some confidence goes a long way toward snagging up the pursuit of happiness.

Cosmic fairness is often discussed as justice. I have a better shot at getting cosmic fairness than man-made justice, but I don't really count on either one even though I wouldn't shoo them away if they turned up one night looking for a meal and a place to get their bearings.

The older I get, the less I am able to offer sensible opinions about big cosmic issues. But I'm still dynamite on matters of great insignificance—like my plastic parking light.

As I sat in the dentist's chair a few weeks back holding up my end of the conversation with knowing strangles and insightful gargles, a very nice woman slowly backed her car into the front of mine because, she said, she was "waving to a friend." Rather than flee, she waited until my teeth were pronounced fit for continued service, and confessed.

We examined my car together. I saw no damage. Hers, too, was uninjured. She gave me her contact information in any event. I thanked her for being honest.

About a week later, I noticed that my driver's-side, parking-light cover was cracked and loose. Since I had not been waving-and-driving recently, I figured that the bump at the dentist's office had caused a hairline fracture that subsequent vibration had turned into a break.

I thought about asking her to cover the \$50 replacement, and then I started thinking about my standard of evidence.

Judges and arbitrators -- I am the latter -- are expected to evaluate charges against one of three common standards depending on the type of case: preponderance of evidence, clear and convincing or beyond reasonable doubt. The hardest standard to meet -- beyond reasonable doubt -- is used in criminal cases.

Was I convinced that even a preponderance of the facts showed that the pleasant, wave-to-her-friend-while-backing-up lady caused the crack in my plastic?

She could respond: "How do I know that you didn't run into somebody -- or somebody ran into you -- during the week between the dentist's office and when you noticed the crack? It wasn't broken when you looked at it, was it? Isn't that proof that I'm not responsible? Aren't you trying to get me to pay for what you did after I ran into you?"

At most, I decided I only had circumstantial evidence and a plausible theory. I could infer causation through context and associations, but I could not prove that she was responsible. I realized that I did not know with any certainty what actually caused the break. If I called her, which I didn't, she would have sent me \$50.

This is one way that humans, including me, have devised to handle cosmic unfairness—suck it up and pay the fifty bucks. It sometimes costs more to make ourselves whole in one way than to pay a price in another way. A grain of unfairness is, after all, no more than a grain of unfairness.

One benefit of eating an unmerited cost is that I can add it to my portfolio of historical grievances. My wife, Melissa, says that I hold grudges, which, I think, is simply another way of saying that I have a good memory for certain things.

Then the cosmic crapshoot struck again, this time on my pickup truck.

I was in upstate New York -- about as up as you can get and not have Quebecers scold you in French for speaking English, as well as for speaking bad French and good French -- last week when I stopped for gas at a full-service station on a Mohawk reservation. As a teenager opened the sheet-metal cover to get at my gas cap, I heard him say something about it being "hard to open." When I investigated, the cover's spring was either broken or sprung. My fuel-tank cover was sticking out and flapping around like a Dumbonic ear.

The kid didn't admit anything. I couldn't prove that it hadn't been broken when I pulled in, though as far as I know it wasn't. I'd never had any trouble opening it. But it could have "become" broken between fill-ups unbeknown to me.

I didn't have enough evidence to accuse him of breaking it, and I didn't want to get him in trouble. So I said nothing at the cash register and drove off, muttering about a grain here and a grain there. This one turns out to weigh about \$100.

I know these things happen to everyone.

They always fit a pattern: they're undeserved, unpredictable, arbitrary and cannot be defended. Nonetheless, had I not parked exactly where I did at the dentist's office and had I chosen a self-serve station, neither would have occurred.

Maybe the cosmos is giving me a heads-up, since I refuse to answer my cellphone and even diss the thing in print.

Am I being reminded that unwarranted stuff happens? Am I being warned that a large unfairness is coming? Are my knuckles being rapped for something I did or didn't do? Am I being inoculated against a big mess by dealing magnanimously with these little ones?

I'm inclined to believe that any interactive cosmos that spends its time dropping grains on my vehicles should get a better life. Still...why me?

When I've asked that question about genuinely hard matters, the only answer I've come up with is, Why not me? I have no exemption from getting wet while running through life's rain drops. Stuff happens, because stuff is part of being alive.

I know people who have had a much harder time than I've had. I'm not better in any sense than they are; I'm probably worse.

I don't think much will come of calling for a greater measure of fairness in the allocation of cosmic misery. A good call, however, can't hurt.

I'm not above grumbling about being both wet and out \$150.

And like Dumbo, I don't forget.

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